

+In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three, AMEN

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...so begins the confession of faith that Israel is directed to make when at last they possess the Promised Land. They are also instructed to bring to the Lord the first fruits of their labors. These few verses from Deuteronomy sum up succinctly the whole history of the People of God, from God's call of Abraham, to Joseph's success in Egypt, to Israel's eventual captivity there, to their deliverance by God, and their arrival in the promised land.

It is this larger story of the people of Israel that Jesus calls upon when, after his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads him into the desert and he is tested and tempted by the devil. The temptations to make bread from stone, to worship something other than God, to test whether or not God is really present with him, all echo the temptations that Israel faced during their wanderings in the wilderness. Even the timeframe—40 days, a day for each of Israel's years in the wilderness—links the story of Jesus to the story of the Hebrew people. Jesus, weak and hungry after his ordeal, draws on the narrative of his people to help him resist temptation. His responds to the tempter with quotes taken directly from the book of Deuteronomy, chapters 6 through 8.

The devil is testing Jesus' knowledge of who he is, and whose he is. In the Gospel narrative, Jesus has just been baptized. He has seen the heavens open up, and the Spirit of God descend upon him, he has heard God's words, "this is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Jesus has been given his identity.

But immediately this identity and this self knowledge are put to the test. Who are you? Whose are you? Jesus must decide what it means to be the Son of God. If you are the son of God, says the tempter, you will be able to take care of yourself, you will be have authority over the kingdoms of the world in space in time, you will be invincible. The devil tempts Jesus to be the kind of messiah that the world is expecting, one who will overthrow Roman rule, one who with personal, military and political might and power will usher in the reign of God—a true earthly kingdom. He is tempted to be miraculous, all-powerful and invulnerable. Jesus is tempted to pick up the reins of his ministry in a way that will avoid the cross. He is tempted to determine his own destiny.

But Jesus refuses self-determination in favor of following God's unfolding plan for him. He anchors his identity as Son of God in the stories of God's people, and the stories of God's dealings with them, and in God's expectations of the faithful. Israel is a people called out by God, sustained by God alone, and completely dependent upon God for their very existence. Jesus quotes Israel's story to the tempter, choosing, like them, to live because of what God provides, and to worship God alone, and trust God's presence in good times and in bad. Jesus quotes from the foundational stories of his people and so claims his identity within the great narrative, as one who puts his trust in God above trust in power, riches, and self-reliance. He draws on the core of Israel's identity, summed up chapters 6 through 8 of Deuteronomy.

Temptation comes to us with the same subtle questions: Who are you? Whose are you? And I think the story of Jesus' temptation provides us with a model for grounding our own answer in the stories of faith. The verses with which Jesus counters temptation are as appropriate today as they were to Jesus, and perhaps even more so, when we examine the context in which they are set. Chapters 6 to 8 of Deuteronomy, as well as chapter 26 which began our readings this morning, are, from start to finish, a warning to Israel

not to forget about God, and their dependence on God, when they are no longer alien, or oppressed, or a wilderness-wandering people. Take heed, the Deuteronomist cries—beware the dangers and the temptations of the Promised Land. Beware the temptation of prosperity! Do not forget who you are. Do not forget whose you are.

Deuteronomy 6 begins with the warning: when the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors...take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt: The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear...and Deuteronomy 8 concludes the warning: When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness...Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth. But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you do forget the Lord your God and

follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.”

Prosperity is a temptation that threatens our very existence. It is here that I think today’s readings really have meaning for us, as 21<sup>st</sup> century, American Christians living and working and worshipping within sight of the seat of government of what is arguably the worlds most prosperous and powerful nation. Were there ever a people as thoroughly possessed of the Promised Land as we are today?

It occurs to me that most of us here, and, really, all of us, by the world’s standards *already* have those things that the tempter offered to Jesus: the power of self determination, the power to make and enforce rules, wealth, and a growing sense of invulnerability. We who enjoy material prosperity are uniquely vulnerable to serving and worshipping false gods, we who have so much, are in danger becoming servants to our very prosperity and power, a path that, according to Deuteronomy, will lead to our death..

Henri Nouwen writes, “There is probably no culture in which people are so unabashedly encouraged to seek power as ours. ...In this country of pioneers

and self-made people, in which ambition is praised from the first moment we enter school until we enter the competitive world of free enterprise, we cannot imagine that any good can come from giving up power or not even desiring it.”

We serve the gods of power and wealth and and might. Our education and scientific knowledge lead us to believe we are invulnerable. We are all tempted daily to avoid sacrifice, suffering and death, and having done so, to believe that we control our own destiny. We are tempted to believe that because we dwell in the land of milk and honey, we must be God’s chosen.

Instead, we must, remember the warning of Deuteronomy. We must remember who we are, and whose we are. A wandering Aramean was *our* ancestor. We must reclaim our dependence on God alone, and remember that it is God alone that we serve. If we find ourselves in a land flowing with milk and honey, we must remember that the milk and honey are God’s and offer back to God the first fruits of our labors.

Today I want to offer to you a single possibility of giving that first fruit. In your bulletins you will find an insert about Episcopal Relief and

Development's ONE Episcopalian, the Episcopal Church's part of the ONE Campaign to fight extreme poverty and disease.

The ONE campaign grew out of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, aimed at dramatically reducing extreme poverty globally by the year 2015. You can find a list of the 8 Millennium Development goals in your bulletin insert. They are:

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. To achieve universal primary education
3. To promote gender equality and empower women.
4. To reduce child mortality
5. To improve maternal health
6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. To ensure environmental stability
8. To develop a global partnership for development

At its 74<sup>th</sup> General Convention in 2004, the Episcopal Church endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, and the General Convention this past summer adopted the MDGs as a mission priority for the next 3 years, and set

aside .7% of its budget for MDG-related programs. The General Convention has challenged the church at all levels—individual, parish and diocesan—to expand and intensify advocacy for and contribution to the achievement of the MDGs. At our own Diocesan convention a month ago, the Episcopal Diocese of Washington voted in favor of contributing .7% of its budget for the Millennium Development Goals.

ONE is a movement of humanitarian groups as well as churches and denominational bodies that seek to convince the U.S. government to spend an additional ONE percent of its budget each year on MDG-related programs. ONE Episcopalian links the work of ONE, and ECUSA's efforts on behalf of the MDGs.

By mid-year we will have reached the half-way point in the time set to meet these goals, and we are well behind track, especially in the most impoverished countries. It is up to us to hold our government accountable to keep its promise to support the Millennium Development Goals. The ONE Episcopalian campaign provides a framework for the Episcopal Church to do this over the next three years and beyond.

Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori has called for Episcopal congregations to observe today—the first Sunday and Lent—as ONE Sunday, to pray for the fulfillment of the Goals and to take a special offering for Episcopal Relief and Development’s efforts to end poverty. She says:

As Christians around the world begin their Lenten journeys with commitments to acts of personal devotion, prayer and almsgiving, congregational celebration of ONE Sunday provides an opportunity to deepen our commitment to actively participate in God’s mission of healing the world....The work of repairing and restoring relationships with God and the created order, as in the vision of Isaiah we hear on Ash Wednesday, has always stood at the center of Lenten discipline. Through the combined actions of prayer, commitment to advocacy for the MDGs and a an annual offering for Episcopal Relief and Development’s efforts to fight poverty in the world, Episcopalians can live out a very traditional Lenten commitment in a way that is deeply relevant to the world around us.”

So I invite you to please consider making an offering to Episcopal Relief and Development today, or send your check to the church office sometime this week. Read the bulletin insert for other ways that you can join the effort—

by joining the ONE campaign, by writing your congressperson, by logging on to the Episcopal Church's website and reading more about Episcopal Relief and Development, and the Millennium Development Goals.

As we begin to keep Lent this year, I commend to you this simple way to give of your first fruits, to discover and remember who in heaven's name we are, as baptized people and as a baptized community. We must stand firm against the temptation to surrender our true identity to a world that seduces us with power, success and wealth. Like Israel when they settle at last in the Promised Land we are faced with a choice. Who will we serve? How will we serve?

Preached by the Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane at Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, MD, First Lent, Year C, February 25, 2007.